



FELICIA GREENE

A
RECKLESS
Affair

THE FENWICK SISTERS

BOOK FOUR

A Reckless Affair

by Felicia Greene

‘Are you sure you wish to stay in here? At least go to the morning room. It’s prettier in there, and you can read your book.’

‘Phoebe, I’m quite well. Don’t feel you need to play at being a hostess with me.’ Diana Fenwick smiled at her sister. Marriage and children dulled some women, extinguishing their spark, but the opposite was true of Phoebe; she shone like a newly discovered star. The Southill estate seemed all the more beautiful when she, Hugh and her tiny daughter came to visit; the flowers grew more brightly, the weather gave up the last of its warmth before the true frosts arrived. ‘I’ll stand here and stir this syllabub. I’ll be quite content.’

‘Are you sure? Julia will worry.’

‘Julia can worry all she likes. No-one’s ever worried about me reading during a gathering, though—I doubt she’ll start now.’

‘Normally you just read in the middle of the gathering. You don’t wander off to do it.’

‘The sun’s bright, even though it’s wintry. I need to cool my head.’

‘Are you certain, dear?’

‘Yes.’ It was nice to have one’s younger sisters worry about you, but not when they made you feel like an elderly spinster inclined towards the eccentric. Diana smiled, hoping Phoebe could see the steel behind it. ‘Very.’

Phoebe, fortunately, knew better than to push. With a bright smile, her yellow gown fluttering about her like the wings of a goldfinch, she nodded and went back to the gardens. Diana watched her through the window as she walked across the lawns, settling back down among the laughing, feasting group: Julia, her husband Southill, Phoebe, Hugh, the Robinson couple, and...

... oh, where on earth was he? There was no way she could settle here in peace if his whereabouts were unknown. Picking up the whisk on the battered wooden table, Diana began to beat the syllabub with no small amount of anger.

She had come into the kitchens to avoid Max. Maximilian de Feur, a highly stupid name for a highly irritating individual. Alas, to Diana’s extreme incomprehension, only she seemed to see through Max’s charming, witty exterior—the rest of her sisters, even wise little Agnes, seemed completely taken in. She was the only one who had to sit near him, gritting her teeth, unable to bear the man’s near-constant presence ever since Phoebe had married Hugh.

That was the biggest problem with Max. It wasn’t his tousled dark brown hair that had barely seen a brush, or his smirk, or his arrogant way of speaking, or the way he managed to look as if he never shaved despite presumably being acquainted with both the tools and the time to do so. It was the fact that he was constantly, irrepressibly, *here*. He’d arrived here as a friend as soon as Phoebe had been married, he was here now as she attempted to find peace and goodwill through finishing syllabub—and if Phoebe remained happy with Hugh, then Max would be at every gathering for the rest of Diana’s natural life.

The thought was almost unbearable. Being this aware of someone was exhausting; having one’s spine prickle whenever the man entered a room, one’s brain begin to fiendishly plan possible responses to impertinent questions that could very well never be asked. Diana swallowed a sigh, stirring the syllabub with even more force as she tried to think of more contentment-inducing things.

Books. There were still so many books she needed to read. Books, flowers, tea that was made much more strongly than the fashion, the smile on Phoebe’s daughter’s face... but still, Amaryllis? Really? It was as if Phoebe wanted her to be the laughing stock of ballrooms. No, this wasn’t the time to be uncharitable—books, flowers, smiles, sunshine and small rabbits and other things, there had to be other things...

She sensed him before she saw him. Her back was suddenly ramrod-straight, her fingers gripping the whisk with deathly potency as Max entered the room. She wouldn't turn around, absolutely not—they'd been snipping at each other over the picnic blanket with far more venom than was strictly necessary, keeping it just humorous enough to conceal their irritation from the others.

Max crossed the sunlit expanse of kitchen, looking out of the window for all the world as if she wasn't there. Another extreme annoyance; he never bothered to address her anymore on the brief occasions they happened to be in the same place without others being around. A gross impertinence; Diana would have raised it with him, had she not been irrationally certain that to bring up his rudeness would be, somehow, to lose.

Still. It was impossible to say *nothing*. 'Do you require something?' 'Shade. Silence.'

How the man had any friends was beyond her imagining. 'I'm sure both of those things could be found in abundance at your townhouse.'

'Really?' That made Max turn, a smirk on his lips. Diana mentally kicked herself. 'Why are you so sure about my townhouse? Would you like to visit?'

'Are you enjoying yourself here?'

'A nice change of subject. And of course I'm enjoying myself—your sisters couldn't be more hospitable. And Phoebe looks radiant.'

It was rare to find a point of conversation where no offence could be given, or taken, between them. 'Yes. She does.'

'As does the child.'

'Indeed.'

'Amaryllis.' Max paused, as if he were about to say something astonishing. In the end, though, he simply repeated the name. Diana fought a rising tide of irritation. 'Amaryllis.'

'Are you having trouble with the pronunciation? The spelling, perhaps?'

'Oh, I'm sure I'll manage to puzzle it out with enough attention.' Max smiled. The man had the audacity to respond to flagrant provocations as if they were normal questions, which left one feeling inexplicably silly. 'Still. Amaryllis.'

'If you wish to make a point, sir, perhaps it would be a more efficient use of time if you simply said it.'

'I don't consider this brief moment indoors a period of time that can be spent usefully, Miss Fenwick.' There was the slightest edge to Max's voice now; she'd managed to needle him. Good. 'Do you?'

'I understand looking beyond the end of your own nose is unfamiliar to you, sir, but do try. You'll see I'm engaged in work—useful work.'

‘Making an indifferent job of something as a way of keeping your hands busy is hardly useful. I’d say you’re making more work for whichever poor maid has to clear this away.’

‘What an interesting observation.’

‘I am interesting, aren’t I?’

‘Oh, yes. As interesting as a discussion of the weather.’ If she stirred this syllabub any more violently, the mixture would separate. ‘Or a rainy Sunday without books.’

‘It’s almost as if you’re insulting me, Miss Fenwick.’

‘Goodness, really?’

‘Yes. I’d be attentive to that, if I were you. A sharp tongue hardly makes for a marriageable lady.’

‘You’re an authority on many things. Quite what those things are I have yet to discover, but I’m almost sure they exist.’ Diana put down her spoon, smiling sweetly in an attempt to quell the rage flooding every part of her. ‘But when it comes to marriage, or what makes one marriageable, I can safely say that there are cows in the fields who would give better advice than you.’

That kept Max quiet for a long, tense moment. Diana picked up her spoon again, still smiling as she stirred, her body braced for the next shot. It would come, she was sure of it—and whatever it was, whatever Max decided to say, it was going to be the straw that broke the camel’s back.

Eventually, with the softest sigh, Max spoke again. ‘Amaryllis.’

The spoon fell into the syllabub with a soft plop. ‘What of it?’

‘Nothing. It’s... it’s a very unusual name.’

The fact that someone as unworthy as Max had thought the same thing she had caused a tide of shame in Diana’s chest. ‘You have no right to criticise my sister’s choice of name for her baby.’

‘Making a reasonable observation isn’t criticising. Has all your reading not taught you the difference?’

‘Reading the advertisements in a newspaper would be more edifying than this ludicrous pap of a conversation.’

‘Once again, you’re mixing up your meanings. This isn’t a conversation, Miss Fenwick—this is an argument. Do you need lessons?’

‘If I need lessons in erudition, sir, I’ll go to your friend Mr. Winthrop. If I ever need an education in dissolution, rudeness and how to gamble away one’s fortune on card games and disreputable women, I’ll know exactly who to ask.’

They’d danced around the edges of rudeness before, but she had just stepped very firmly over the line. Diana held her breath, determined not to show any weakness at all, as Max blinked.

When he eventually smiled, looking like the rakish cousin of a

wolf, she swallowed down a slight gasp. ‘One doesn’t smile at an insult, sir.’

‘I don’t consider what you said an insult. If anything, I consider it a compliment.’

‘Of course you do. Now who doesn’t understand what words mean?’

‘Oh, I know I’m dissolute. And I’ve never seen spending money on enjoyment—whether from cards or women—as a bad thing. And if you, Miss Fenwick, you in your little tower of books and pretensions, have managed to see my reputation even from your lofty heights—well then. I’m not doing such a bad job.’

He was... unconscionable. Impossible. Diana felt her hands trembling; there was a faint roaring in her ears, a sound that came from the sheer rush of rage that had filled her body. No, not rage—something else, something close to rage but not quite there.

Damn it, why couldn’t she put a name to it? Why couldn’t she open her mouth and give a ready reply to this smug, ridiculous clown of a man?

‘Look at that. I’ve managed to silence you.’ Max raised an eyebrow, that infuriating smile still on his face. ‘Perhaps I should offer my services about town. Someone will want to use this talent—’

He stopped, his smile collapsing into open-mouthed horror, as Diana took a handful of lemon syllabub and smeared it onto his face.

It was only when she saw a small glob of syllabub drop onto the kitchen floors that she truly realised just what she had done. No running away from this, no going back—damn it, she wouldn’t yield. Instead she stared, trying not to laugh, as Max held up a hand to the side of his face as if he’d been shot.

He stood very still for a moment. Then, with a swift force that robbed the breath from Diana’s lungs, he gripped her wrist tightly. Not tightly enough to hurt, but more than enough to keep her there, rooted to the spot, staring.

Was he going to hit her? No, no—there was anger in his eyes, but mostly confusion. Diana tried not to blink, even as she realised she was slowly leaning forward. He wasn’t pulling her, neither was she consciously choosing to move closer... it was simply happening.

If he wasn’t going to strike her, or say something uniquely cutting, what was going to occur now? And why did the tension filling her body feel so dangerously close to excitement?

A rustle of skirts in the corridor brought her back to her senses. Max immediately let go of her wrist; Diana moved away from him as quickly as she could, silently pushing a cloth across the worn wooden kitchen table. Max picked it up without looking at her, wiping away every trace of syllabub as Agnes walked into the room.

‘Do you need something, dear?’ It was important to behave as if nothing was untoward. ‘Is the sun getting too hot?’

‘It is. I can’t concentrate on the colours if I keep having to screw up my eyes.’ Agnes looked calmly at Max, who still had the smallest fleck of syllabub clinging to his eyebrow. ‘What happened to your face?’

‘Nothing, Miss Fenwick. As you said, it’s terribly sunny—I needed to refresh myself.’ Max gently put the cloth back down on the table, still not looking at Diana. ‘Now that I’m refreshed, I’ll go back to the gardens.’

‘A good idea.’ Diana couldn’t resist speaking. He should at least look at her—he’d touched her only a moment ago, and now he couldn’t look at her? What a coward. ‘At least I can preserve my peace as I serve the syllabub.’

Max didn’t answer. His silence should have felt like a victory, but didn’t. Diana turned back to the bowl of syllabub, hastily portioning off the part she had used to smear on Max and putting the uncontaminated parts into small glass dishes as Agnes sat in the chair by the hearth. ‘Don’t call Cook to do this if she’s still sleeping. I’ll do it.’

‘Mhm.’

‘And let the maids have a rest as well. They’ve spent all morning preparing.’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s good for me to do something with my hands. I can’t read constantly, much as I would wish to.’

‘Of course.’

‘Agnes?’

‘Yes?’

‘Why are you staring at your embroidery needle as if it’s going to reveal the secrets of the world to come, rather than speaking to me like a normal person?’

‘Because I have to tell you something that you’re not going to like. At least, I’m fairly sure you won’t like it.’ Agnes looked up at Diana, her gaze disarmingly frank. ‘So before I have to tell you, I’m making sure that I’ve adequately prepared my pattern for when I pick it up again later.’

Diana stared. When she had finally recovered enough of her composure to speak again, she folded her arms. ‘What am I not going to like? Have you done something?’

‘I haven’t done anything.’

‘Then why won’t I like what you’re going to say?’

‘Because I know you won’t. Sometimes I know things—I know you won’t like this.’

‘Refrain from sounding like a doomed Greek prophetess, if you would, and simply tell me what’s happened.’

‘You’re in love with Hugh’s friend. Max. You’re in love with him, and I think you should know that you are.’

Of all the things Diana had imagined her sister saying, this was at the very bottom of the list. No, not even that—it simply didn’t exist, not even on an imaginary list of shocking things that could be said to one’s sister. She raised an eyebrow, clenching her jaw tight so her mouth didn’t fall open. ‘Excuse me?’

‘Don’t make me say it again. You heard me.’

‘I heard, but I certainly didn’t understand.’

‘What’s there to understand? You spend all your time needling Max whenever he’s here. You spend most of your time when he’s not here complaining about him. Whenever he’s in a room, you don’t pay attention to anyone else. What’s that, if not love?’

‘Hatred. It’s called hatred.’ Diana unfolded her arms, clenching her fists as she began to pace about the room. ‘If you had any true knowledge of people, Agnes, you would know that hatred is close to love in its outward aspects.’

‘Oh, yes. Very close.’

‘Close, but not the same! Are you truly telling me this in a serious fashion, as if I’m not going to laugh in your face?’

‘No. I was fairly sure you were going to laugh in my face the moment I made my observation.’ Agnes blinked, her face impossibly owlsh. ‘But I decided to inform you anyway.’

‘Wasted breath.’

‘Very possibly.’ Agnes smiled. ‘But talk is often a precursor for action.’ Before Diana could grip her by the shoulders and shake her, she nimbly leapt from her seat and ran to the threshold of the door. ‘You won’t be able to say I didn’t warn you!’

‘Go and speak to our guests rather than hiding in here like a hermit, and remove these foolish thoughts from your mind before I hit you with a slipper.’ Diana was only half-joking; the certainty in Agnes’ face was almost frightening. ‘Go!’

With a cheerful shrug, Agnes ran. Diana was left alone in the kitchens; she leaned against the wall, taking a long, slow breath.

Agnes had demonstrated this sort of foolishness before. She’d made ever so many predictions and observations about Phoebe and Hugh, now happily married and with a new baby. She’d been correct when it came to them, of course, correct in every particular—but this was ridiculous. A fanciful young woman seeing things when none were there.

She looked out of the window at the lawns. Max was standing next to a corner of the picnic blanket, laughing heartily at something Hugh

had said; Diana glared, her fists clenching again, before realising with a jolt that Agnes would have predicted exactly this reaction.

She was looking at him because she hated him. Of course she was. There was no other possible explanation that made sense, and she certainly wasn't going to start entertaining ideas that were ridiculous in the extreme.

Max half-turned. For a moment they stared into one another's eyes, mutual shock radiating through the glass of the window, before Diana reluctantly tore her eyes away.

Yes. Hatred. Nice, uncomplicated hatred that didn't need to be examined any further. She would return to the lawns now, laughing and talking and making her way through her latest book when the conversation dulled—and if she began thinking about Max, Agnes or anything that had happened in this kitchen, she would simply drink another glass of ratafia.

Or perhaps two glasses. Three at the very most. Any more than that would be an extravagance.

'Darling.' Max looked as forlornly as he could into the face of Mrs. Sanforth as she sat on his bed, the perfumed night air making its way through the half-opened window of his bedroom. His townhouse had many attractions, not least a very discreet side-entrance that any married woman need have no fear of using, but the garden had always been his favourite part. He breathed in the scent of frost and roses, trying to remember the part he was supposed to be playing. Lovelorn rake with mysterious commitments—yes, that was it. 'I wish we could meet tonight. Alas, we cannot.'

'But you promised we'd meet tonight.' Mrs. Sanforth pouted. It was an unattractive expression in children, but on an adult woman it was almost unforgivable. 'Has something happened?'

'My dear, I'm a vain man. My faculties tonight are not quite at full strength—I would hate to disappoint you.' It was both true and flattering; Mrs. Sanforth immediately perked up, and Max felt slightly less like an incorrigible swine. 'Another night?'

'Are you sure you wouldn't like me to stay and read to you, if you don't feel well?'

The thought of Mrs. Sanforth reading to him made Max shake his head very quickly. 'I couldn't possibly ask you to do such a thing.'

'But I'm happy to do it!'

'But it would make me feel so terribly bad. You wouldn't have me feel terribly bad, would you?'

'I... no. Of course not.' Mrs. Sanforth stroked his cheek. Max attempted to look as if he was enjoying it, making a mental note to send an anonymous letter to Mr. Sanforth recommending he and his

wife journey to some remote seaside town for the summer. 'My poor darling.'

'You're too good to me.' Max smiled as Porter, his discreet, stone-faced butler, gently took Mrs. Sanforth out of the room. 'Far, far too good.'

'But when shall we meet again?'

'I'll write.'

He would write. It would be a lovely letter too, elegant and full of compliments. The part where he ended it all with her would be difficult to read, yes, but there would be more than enough flowery nonsense in it to appease Mrs. Sanforth and avoid an ugly scene.

Max kept smiling until Mrs. Sanforth was completely out of sight, then sat down on his bed with a long, weary sigh.

He'd thrown women out of his house before, normally not as politely as that. One couldn't keep up a life of pure rakehood every day of the week; sometimes, as little as the ton believed it, he rather wanted to read a book and go to bed early. Tonight, rather than pure exhaustion, his mind and heart were simply too turbulent to allow another soul into his most private sanctum.

Diana Bloody Fenwick. What on earth had happened in the kitchens? He still couldn't categorise it. Women could normally be placed into neat little boxes, but that cursed woman was rejecting each and every one.

Snuff would help. He reached for the box on his bedside table, taking a meditative pinch as he reflected.

It hadn't been so different an argument from their usual back and forth. More highly-charged, perhaps—he'd chosen to talk about the baby's name because he had been sure it would irritate her, and he'd certainly triumphed on that score. They'd both gone a little further than usual, but what was wrong with that? An argument was practically expected by now—and he hadn't said anything truly reprehensible.

And then Miss Fenwick had thrown a dessert on his face. As if that was a normal thing for the sister of a duchess to do. And as he'd tried in vain to work out what the hell was happening, she'd stood her ground...

... and then, all of a sudden, he'd wanted to kiss her so much that not doing it felt like dying.

Max sighed. He took another, larger pinch of snuff, the kind he only ever used when he'd drunk too much or spent too much time in a gaming hell, and was rewarded with nothing but a large sneeze and a head that ached even more viciously.

He'd never wanted to kiss a woman so much. Not even when he'd been an adolescent, desperate to be initiated into the secret, sensual

world that men and women shared. That sudden, blinding passion that had all but robbed him of his senses... where had that come from?

If anything, he'd always taken pride in being the one who desired less. The one who could discard a woman as easily and completely as... well, as he'd done with poor Mrs. Sanforth. Being the one who would give in, who'd succumb to his baser feelings while the woman in question resisted—Christ, no. That wasn't what he wanted at all.

At least, he thought he hadn't wanted that. But after today, his wants were being violently rearranged somewhere in the darkness of his mind and resisting every attempt he made to stop the process.

He lay back on his pillows, wishing for either a large glass of brandy or a punch in the face. Anything to dislodge this tension, this near-painful collection of feelings that had invaded his body, leaving him with an aching head and a hard cock. Something that would send him to sleep with no more thoughts, absolutely none—especially none concerning Diana Fenwick.

At the thought of her name, his cock twitched. Max stared down at the bulge in his breeches as one would a rebellious cat, irritation and profound incomprehension battling for supremacy.

Quite why his body had decided to have this exaggerated reaction to a woman he deeply disliked was beyond his ken. He didn't have to consider the whys, and he wasn't going to. The only thing he needed to be concerned with was how to make this unwanted desire go away as quickly as possible, before he needed to be in the same room as the woman again.

There was, of course, one way to get rid of them. At least, for tonight. Max glanced at his bedroom door, making sure he'd locked it, before undressing as quickly as possible and kicking his discarded garments to the bottom of the bed.

He would be seeing Miss Fenwick the following week. They were all going to travel to Ketterbrook together; the other sister, Lydia, was recently married. If he wanted to treat Diana with any appearance of normality, all of his latent desires needed to come out now.

He took hold of his cock, closed his eyes, and thought of Diana. She appeared in his head almost instantly; her image had been waiting for him somewhere, his mind concealing it until the perfect moment. How convenient—and how worrying.

You're such a fool. She would look at him, those blue eyes flashing as she put down whatever bloody book she happened to be reading. Don't you know why you tease me so? Why I madden you beyond all comprehension? Because you desire me, you idiot—desire me more than you had ever thought possible.

Her words would probably be less dramatic in reality—but Max didn't have reality to work with. He stroked his cock, growing rougher

moment by moment as he allowed himself to fall into fantasy.

What if that damned sister hadn't interrupted them in the kitchens? What if, instead of taking hold of Diana's wrist and simply staring at her like a fool, unable to tell what the hell he wanted or how he was meant to go about getting it, he had given into the desires that were only now springing to the surface?

He could have kissed her. He could have claimed that flushed, spirited mouth, drawing out moans and sighs as he took possession of it. He could have kissed her neck, that long white line of her throat, all the way down to her bodice—and oh, then her breasts, the soft round swell of her breasts beneath her gown that he'd noted in the past, noted without even consciously considering it. He would kiss his way down to her nipples, suck each reddened nub until she begged for more. Begged for him.

'Fuck.' The fantasy was more powerful than he'd thought. Even that relatively tame frontier had brought him dangerously close to finishing; he'd done much more with other women in real life and never once reached quite such a dizzying erotic charge. He sank deeper into his pillows, his fingers gliding over his cock in sweet, fiery anticipation of what his brain would conjure next.

In this fantasy, Diana would want him to kiss her everywhere. Want him to run his tongue along her thighs and up to her centre, her mound—and she'd be wet for him. Wet for the man she hated, but surprise, surprise—he was hard for her here and now, deliriously so, and he'd always been sure he hated her. She'd want him to kiss her most secret, intimate place, lick her like the most ardent of lovers—hold her as she came—

He bit back a moan, biting his lip painfully hard as he spurted into his hand. Once, twice; the bliss was beyond exquisite, as powerful and pure as a lightning strike. He lay panting in the middle of the bed, spent and blank-brained for a long, delicious period of silence, before the significance of what he'd just done began to creep in and disturb his animal enjoyment.

No desire had been killed by the act he'd just performed. Instead, to Max's dazed horror, his sentiments concerning Diana Fenwick appeared to have grown all the stronger. Now it didn't take any mental effort whatsoever to conjure her up in his mind, asking for all sorts of carnal tricks that he'd been only too happy to perform.

'Bugger.' He closed his eyes, pushing away the new and plentiful thoughts with all his strength. If he didn't manage it here and now, in the salacious safety of his bedroom, there was no way on earth he'd succeed in repressing such desires in Ketterbrook. After a long, frustrating period of silence, his eyes closed and his fists clenched, he got up and washed himself on the basin before throwing himself back

down onto the bed.

Put simply, he wasn't going to think about it. Not Diana Fenwick, not Ketterbrook, and certainly not the enormity of his mistake. He was going to sleep now, the sweet, innocent sleep of the angels, and wake up the following morning with a new and practical zest for life. He wasn't going to spend the night tossing and turning, not at all—and he certainly wouldn't spend tomorrow drinking whisky and gloomily kicking things. Not at all.

And he wouldn't entertain the thoughts of Diana Fenwick that were already creeping back, hardening his cock despite the exertions of a mere moment ago. Diana Fenwick, naked and bright-eyed, begging for both his body and his soul.

It wouldn't be fair to say that Diana thought exclusively of lemon syllabub in the days that led up to the Ketterbrook excursion, but it was certainly on her mind more often than not. So much so, in fact, that one of her favourite books languished unread while she stared out of the window and remembered that day. The day that had been completely normal in almost every respect, apart from that strange, shocking moment in the kitchen—apart from Max's strong hand on her wrist, his eyes so penetratingly fixed on hers.

Really, it was Max's fault that she was thinking about it at all. Yes, she'd been spirited with the syllabub—but it was Max's reaction, the uncanny heat of that particular moment, that had made the following days so very muddled. By the time the morning of the trip came, bundled up in coats and a muff, Diana was almost eager to see him—that way, she could hate him even more thoroughly than before.

By the time Max finally turned up, dressed with such ostentatious elegance that it was all Diana could do not to roll her eyes, she was so desperate to needle him that she practically tripped on the icy steps that led down to the gravel drive. 'You're late.'

'A gentleman is never late. Other things simply happen too early.' The curl of Max's lip as he spoke to her let Diana know that he hadn't forgotten the syllabub incident. A strange feeling of triumph rose in her chest, only to be punctured by Max's next words. 'You look rather clumsy on those steps. Perhaps you require a young chaperone. Someone to help you with stairs, and hand you your spectacles when you can't find them.'

'Only the very coarsest of people make jokes about age.' The rest of the family was bustling around them; Julia had her daughter in her arms and was showering her with kisses, watched by a smiling Southill, while Phoebe and Henry spoke in low tones with their own baby daughter about something no doubt terribly intellectual. Diana made sure to speak as quietly as she could; even if Agnes didn't

appear to be about yet, she didn't want her youngest sister to see her speaking to Max. 'It appears you remain faithful to type.'

'Well,' Max smiled. 'I have to try and remain faithful to something. I don't tend to encourage fidelity in my personal affairs, Miss Fenwick.'

Of course he'd bring up his rakehood. He knew that she couldn't summon up a reasonable response without saying things that no lady should say. Diana mutely glared at him, wishing heartily for the first time that she was of a significantly lower social standing as the chatter of the group ebbed and flowed around her.

Oh, this absolutely *wasn't* the time to think of lemon syllabub. More precisely of the moment that had happened after it; Max's hand on her wrist, strong, commanding. And was she completely incorrect, or had he pulled her just a little closer once he'd taken hold of her?

What had he been planning to do? What had she been planning, somewhere in the midst of all her excitable confusion? There'd been a connection there, a hint of something entirely unnameable... and if she wasn't entirely mistaken, they were looking at one another now in a very similar way.

She didn't feel cold anymore. The temperature of the air didn't seem to matter. Now that Max's eyes were fixed on hers, his silence transformed into something much more brooding than usual, she felt very warm indeed.

'Where are the carriages?' Julia's concerned tones broke the moment; with a sigh of something that wasn't quite relief, Diana looked away. 'They should be here by now.'

'I can go and ask the coachman.' Southill, Julia's husband, frowned as he looked across the lawns. 'They seemed ready to work this morning.'

'An inspection of the barouche can't possibly have taken that long to complete.'

'Perhaps there's a fault with the axle, or the frame? But I can't hear hammering...'

'Oh, no.' Agnes' small voice made itself heard over the general hubbub. 'I think I know why they're late.'

'Why, dear?' Julia turned to Agnes, frowning. 'What's happened?'

Agnes pointed. The entire party turned, including Diana, to watch the door of the old stables where the larger barouche was currently housed. It creaked open, then shut again, as if whatever was concealed within didn't wish to reveal itself to the world... and then, with a slower creak, something wandered out.

It was a chicken. A fat, fluffy chicken the colour of champagne, who waddled out of the stables with a distinct air of self-importance. Others followed; twenty of them came in the end, Diana counting each

and every one with a growing sense of surreal horror.

‘I was almost sure I’d shut the gate properly. I came down yesterday evening as Bessie was feeding them—I wanted to watch them. Play with the chicks a little.’ Agnes shrugged, the gesture perfectly helpless. ‘But it looks as if I didn’t. Oh, if only their field wasn’t so close to the stables... I’m so terribly sorry, Julia.’

‘No matter.’ Julia sighed. ‘But the carriage will be covered in their—well. Their leavings.’

‘Almost definitely. They may have even laid an egg in it somewhere.’

‘Agnes, you must be more careful.’

‘I know. I’m sorry.’ Agnes didn’t sound in the least bit sorry—at least, not to Diana. She bent down to pick up the large champagne-coloured chicken, who cooed contentedly as she gathered it up in her arms. ‘You’re a devilish creature. A terrible hen.’

‘It’s not the hen’s fault. She didn’t do anything deliberately.’

No. Diana stared hard at Agnes. *But I’m fairly sure someone did.*

‘Let us move away from the culpability of animals, and onto practicalities.’ Julia turned to Southill, who nodded. ‘We must use more carriages. I’ll go with you, dear, while Phoebe will go with Hugh. As for Agnes and Diana—’

‘I promised Anna I’d travel with her. She’s unused to travelling, and she gets terribly sick.’ Agnes spoke before Diana could even open her mouth, evidently ready with a story. ‘I would hate for her to take ill. She’s only been in service here for a month.’

‘That’s kind of you, Agnes. Kind enough to balance out your forgetfulness when it comes to gates. Travel with the maid, then. And Diana, you’ll have to travel with—’

No. Diana screamed the word in her head, but couldn’t bring it past her throat. She turned to Max, whose eyes were wide in what looked like mutual horror.

‘—with Mr. De Feur.’ Julia pursed her lips, evidently remembering Max’s reputation, before shaking her head. ‘It can’t be helped.’

It was all very well having plans made about one, but a comment like that couldn’t be overlooked. ‘What can’t be helped?’

‘Diana, it can’t. The situation, I mean.’ Julia lowered her voice, speaking in a quick, practical murmur. ‘Look, I know you heartily dislike the man, but could you manage to restrain yourself for a short carriage ride to Ketterbrook? He’s hardly going to practise his louche charms on his best friend’s sister-in-law.’

As statements went, it managed to be accurate while being extremely wrong at the same time. Diana, unable to find any logical thing to say in response, managed a weak nod.

Julia looked over Diana’s shoulder, smiling. ‘I do hope that’s not a

problem, Mr. de Fleur.'

Diana was almost glad she couldn't see Max's face. All she could tell, from the way Julia turned happily back to her husband, was that he had nodded his assent.

Agnes was stroking the hen as if it were a cloth doll. Diana glared at her sister, hoping against hope that Agnes would look up and feel at least a tiny amount of her wrath, but the only pair of eyes she found were the blank, black ones of the hen. Having a glaring competition with a chicken seemed like the ultimate indignity; she forced herself to look across the lawns, where the shamefaced coachmen and stable boys were finally arriving with carriages that weren't splattered with chicken leavings.

A carriage ride with Max. A carriage ride in the sole company of Max, the man mere inches away, no doubt already planning all kinds of insults to rain down upon her head. And of all the things to feel in this precise situation... well...

... some small, shameful part of her was excited.

A carriage alone, with Diana. Of all the things Max really hadn't wanted, it was this—exactly this, down to the smallest detail. The squelch of the horses' feet in the mud as the barouche clattered along the road, the whistling of the driver, the sparse trees outside the window slowly becoming a full-fledged wood as they rode on... and Diana opposite him, with no-one else about to temper either his thoughts or his behaviour.

She was beautiful today. He mentally kicked himself for ever having thought of her in this way; now the thoughts were impossible to stop. Even bundled up in clothes for the cold, crisp weather, her hands deep in a muff and her hair escaping from its pins beneath her hat, she was ravishing. She glared at him from across the carriage seat, barely bothering to look at the view, and all Max could reasonably do was stare back.

Why couldn't he think of anything cutting to say? He'd been very good at the verbal parry and thrust of their usual conversation as they'd stood on the steps of the Southill Estate, but ever since the carriage problem had been revealed his usual insults had withered away, nowhere to be found. He couldn't stop looking at Diana's lips, at the bright glitter of her eyes beneath her frown—and damn it, he couldn't think of any way to rile her. He couldn't think of anything to say at all.

He couldn't keep staring like a madman. He would have to think of something neutral to comment upon, some observation that couldn't be taken the wrong way. Eventually, with a small flash of triumph, he spoke. 'You don't have a book.'

Diana's eyes narrowed. It was clear she was inspecting his comment for any hint of an insult; Max kept silent, fighting an entirely irrational surge of annoyance. She had every right to view him with suspicion, after all. '... No. I don't.'

'You usually do.'

'I know.'

'But you don't today.'

'I have three in my bags. They're on the top of the coach.'

'Ah.'

If this was normal conversation, normal people could keep it. Diana looked bored silly, and Max frankly agreed with her. He thought about saying so, making it a moment for the both of them to laugh at, but shame kept his lips closed.

When Diana spoke again, he jumped. 'I would like to have a bookshop.'

'What?'

'A bookshop. If I had to choose how to make a living, rather than a living being given to me, I would have a bookshop.' Diana's cheeks were flushed; she sounded as shocked as Max that she was making such a pure, vulnerable statement. 'That way I'd never be too far away from a book.'

The traditional thing to do would be to insult her. There were six or seven sneering comments already floating around the back of his mind, ready to be used. But to his distinct surprise, Max found that he didn't want to say anything that would damage such a simple dream. The very idea of it was inexpressibly soothing: Diana in a bookshop, the proprietress, sitting dreamily in a chair as she read a crisp new novel...

'What?'

Max blinked. 'Beg pardon?'

'You haven't made fun of me yet.' Diana paused, evidently trying to find the words. This was the first time that their conversations had ever approached honesty, or at least acknowledgement of how they usually treated one another; Max realised he was holding his breath. 'Are you feeling well?'

'Yes.' No, he hadn't slept well all week, and she was the reason for it. 'I'm simply being... civil.'

'You're never civil. I'm never civil.'

'No.' The words came in a rush, startling both himself and Diana. 'Have-have we ever considered why that is?'

Diana's eyes were suddenly very wide indeed. Max stared into the depths of her gaze, lost in the beauty therein, forgetting entirely what he had been going to say.

He could kiss her now. Couldn't he? They were both quiet, as if

waiting for something to happen; the carriage was practically floating now, moving much faster than before. It was as if they were travelling on a cloud, so very distant from daily concerns... distant enough to lean forward, just as Diana was doing now, and put his mouth to hers...

A sudden, wrenching jerk threw him from his seat. Diana's scream rang in his ears as the world briefly, savagely tilted; the whinnying of the horses came next, the wild thud of their hooves as they fought against their bridles, then the panicked words of the coachman.

'Are you well, sir? Madam?'

'Are you well?' Max spoke urgently to Diana; she sat crumpled in the corner of the newly tilted carriage, somehow smaller and more fragile-looking than before as she looked up at him. 'Are you?'

'Yes. I think. But what happened?'

'We're well. Both of us.' He'd have an enormous bruise, but to say that now would be whining. Max shouted up to the coachman, his eyes still fixed on Diana. 'What happened?'

'The wheel went. God knows why. First those chickens, and now this.' The coachman's voice was already heavy with bitterness at the cruelty of the universe. 'As long as you're both well. I'll cut the horses free and ride them onto Ketterbrook, then organise a carriage to come and bring you back. We're only half an hour away by now.'

'A good idea.'

'Will you be cold? There are blankets under the seat—and you have your greatcoat, sir?'

'I do.' A brief, searing image of wrapping his greatcoat around Diana's shoulders stopped Max in his tracks for a moment. 'We'll keep warm.'

'Right. I'll get onto Ketterbrook, then, as quickly as possible. Sorry for the trouble, sirs.' The coachman briefly appeared in the upturned window, his red face framed with scarves, his voice full of worry. 'Terribly sorry.'

His heavy footsteps soon receded into nothingness. Max attempted to settle back down into the seat he'd been sitting in before, found himself unable to do so without sliding about in a most undignified fashion, then settled for standing awkwardly. Diana, moving slowly but without any obvious sign of injury, settled down in her previous place as elegantly as before.

They looked at one another warily. Eventually, with a rough clearing of his throat that never normally happened when talking in company, Max spoke again. 'I should go and look at the wheel.'

'Why?'

'To see what happened.'

'I didn't realise you were an expert.'

So they were back to their usual hostility. It was almost comforting. 'Forgive me. Perhaps you should inspect it, given that your expertise is so much greater than mine.'

Diana rolled her eyes, but there was a hint of relief in her voice. 'Go. I can't stop you.'

Now that Max had suggested it, he had to work out a way to exit the carriage with his elegance intact. Alas, the moment that he attempted to open the door, elegance quickly became impossible; he heaved the door open with his shoulder, clambering out of the carriage like an ape. As he slid down onto the muddy ground with a grunt of annoyance, he was almost sure that he heard Diana laugh.

Damn her. He walked around to the part of the carriage that had sunk deeply into the mud, pieces of wheel-spoke lying on the road around them, and looked at the deformed wheel with a low whistle.

'What happened, then?'

Max jumped; Diana's voice was much closer than expected. He bit back a curse, then remembered that it was Diana. She wasn't going to care a straw if he blasphemed. 'The damned thing's twisted beyond repair.'

'Oh, for-how?'

'I don't know. I'm not an expert in the mechanics of carriage building.' Even in the midst of crisis, she managed to annoy him. 'We must have hit a large rock.'

'I don't remember feeling any large rocks. Do you?'

'No.' He had been far too focused on the colour of her cheeks as she'd spoken to him. The smallest details of her appearance had felt far more important than the road; for all he knew, they'd been trundling over silk and honey for the last hour. 'But there's no other possible explanation.'

'But there must be.'

'Why must there be? You're making no sense whatsoever, which is unusual for you. There's normally a particle of reason within the nonsense.'

'Shut up.' Diana's head popped up out of the opened door; her cheeks had acquired that flushed, ripe colour again. Max studied her as she clambered out of the carriage, trying not to focus on the movement of her body as she slid down onto the ground. She came to join him, staring down at the wheel as if it were the end of the world. 'I'm going to murder her.'

'What? Who?'

'No-one. Stop listening to me.'

'We were having a conversation, weren't we?'

'Not anymore.'

'Which female would have sabotaged our carriage? Out with it!'

Diana looked at him. Her eyes were full of far more tension than a simple accident should conjure; Max held his breath, suspicious but curious. 'Agnes.'

'Agnes? Why on earth would Agnes do such a damned foolish thing as this?'

'I-I can't believe she would do something this dangerous.' Diana folded her arms, hugging her own frame as she frowned. 'The chickens were ridiculous, but they weren't liable to leave us injured.'

'The chickens? Don't tell me the chickens were her idea.' Max blinked as the sheer strangeness of the situation washed over him. 'Which doesn't explain the purpose of the chickens, come to think of it.'

'To force us into the same carriage!'

'Why? Does your sister like conflict?'

'No.' Diana looked away. Max had never seen her hide from a direct question before. 'Other reasons.'

At any other time, in any other place, he would push the issue. Demand a direct answer, and begin composing a letter to Bedlam so Agnes could be moved there without delay. But Diana looked so strangely embarrassed when she turned back, so unlike herself, that Max couldn't be anything but compassionate. 'She may not have done it.'

'I sincerely hope she didn't.'

'In any case, it's cold out here. We should take shelter in the carriage.'

'But it could tip!'

'I doubt it. It's stuck fairly firmly in this mud.' Christ, she was irritating even when he tried to be nice to her. 'Come on. Up.'

He braced himself, expecting more of a fight. But Diana, with only the slightest flash of fire in her expression, climbed back up into the carriage and settled herself in the corner furthest from the door. After another look at the wheel, wondering just how on earth Agnes had been behind it if she was indeed responsible, Max climbed up as well.

For a moment, they sat in silence. An eerie, new silence; one that didn't quite match their usual combative quiet, or even the calm before a storm. Max wished in vain for a cigar, for snuff—anything that would stop him sneaking glances at Diana as if she were a ghost, some supernatural creature, that would vanish as soon as he engaged with her directly.

Remembering his fantasies of her was most unwise. Now that he was here at close quarters with her, alone and with nothing he wanted to fight about, he could see all the ways in which his raw, sensual imaginings were crude playthings compared to the woman herself.

'If she did this, I'm sorry.'

Max blinked. He hadn't been expecting Diana to speak. 'Beg pardon?'

'If Agnes did this... I'm sorry.' Diana dispensed her apology as a queen would dispense a favour, her head held high. 'Truly.'

'I should bloody well hope so. You should be.'

'I—oh, that is not the way one is supposed to respond to an apology!'

'What on earth did you expect?' Lord, what a relief. They were back on familiar ground now, tension crackling between them like thunder. 'If she did manage to break the carriage wheel, she should be—'

'Be very careful about what you're going to say.'

'You suggested the idea of her doing it! How am I meant to react—fatherly indulgence? And given that you've provided absolutely no motive for her doing something so demonstrably insane, I fail to see any reason that she would be responsible for this.'

'There are motives.'

'What motives? Does she want to kill us both?'

'No.'

'Well she damn well could have, so I deserve to know if any other motives exist!'

'Attraction!'

'What?'

'Attraction. All right? Attraction.' Diana smacked the seat of the carriage with her fist, her raised voice as much of a surprise to Max as her expression. 'She's decided that you and I are attracted to one another, despite all evidence to the contrary, and even hinted that she'd made efforts to encourage said feeling. The business with the chickens was one thing, but this is quite another. And if you have any care for my feelings, any at all, you won't mention this intolerable fact ever again. Am I clear?'

Max, too shocked to say a single word, nodded. Diana stared at him, trembling, then abruptly turned back to the carriage window.

Attracted? Agnes was no idiot, then, however quiet she was in company. She'd managed to see something that he'd been incapable of detecting in himself. But as for Diana's sentiments...

'You're not saying anything.'

'You told me not to.'

'I know. I expected you to ignore that. You've done so every other time.'

'This is... different.'

'I would very much prefer it not to be.'

That seemed clear enough. Whatever Max had been hiding, she hadn't been concealing anything similar. Biting back a sudden, vicious

spike of disappointment, Max turned to look out of the window.

'I'm serious.' Diana sighed. 'We should never speak of this again.'

'I'm trying not to. You're the one that's continuing.'

'I—shut up.'

'... No. No, I won't.' If she was going to encourage a conversation about this, he was damned if he was going to refuse her. 'If you wish to talk about it, we will.'

'I don't wish to! Not in the slightest!'

'You were the one who suggested it.'

'Agnes suggested it. Her foolishness isn't mine to contend with.'

'Then stop talking. Now. If you stop talking—if you don't say another word—then we will speak of nothing but the most genteel subjects until people come to rescue us.'

He waited for a long, slow minute, practically holding his breath. When he heard the first syllable of Diana's sentence, the relief he felt was almost overwhelming. 'You don't get to decide when I speak or when I don't. I'll speak about anything I like.'

'If you're going to speak, I'm going to speak about attraction.'

'No, you're not.'

'I am. In fact, I think I could get a taste for the subject.' Max turned back to Diana. He'd been expecting anger, rage even—not this strange, fraught vulnerability in her face, making her so much lovelier. 'For a little honesty, at least.'

'Honesty?'

'Yes. I don't think you're being honest with yourself.'

'The *nerve* of you—'

'No nerve. Honesty. If you can't admit that you'd at least enjoy my carnal attentions, Miss Fenwick, then you're the most dishonest woman alive.'

This was so different from before. So different from any way they had ever conversed. It was quiet, for one thing; they were practically murmuring to one another, the distance between them slowly vanishing. The words were painful—how could they not be—but there was something underneath each phrase, something wordless and powerful. Something growing with each passing second.

Eventually Diana spoke. 'You're insane.'

'No, I'm not. I know that if I kissed you, Miss Fenwick—if I touched you—you'd get as much pleasure from the exchange as I would. Maybe even more. I'm certain of it.'

'You can't know that.'

'I think I do. Do you?'

They were so close now. Whether Diana had moved towards him, or he towards her, he didn't know. All he knew was that she was close enough to feel her breath on his face, see the new light in her eyes as

she spoke. 'I'm certain of one thing.'

'What?'

'That you could—could kiss me. You could touch me. You could do anything to me, anything at all, and I would feel nothing.' Her stare was full of fire. 'I'm sure of it.'

'I see.' The carriage was so hot, stifling, despite the cold outside. 'Miss Fenwick, do you know what's going to happen if you keep—'

'I know damn well what's going to happen. I also know, as I said, that I won't feel so much as a frisson of pleasure from the exchange. I believe, sir, that this is known as a challenge.'

She was impossible. Incurrigible. Quite the most singular, perfect woman he'd ever met, and—wait.

Perfect?

No time to think about exactly what that word meant. With an indrawn breath, a half-gasp that could have meant *challenge accepted*, Max covered Diana's mouth with his.

It wasn't a beginner's kiss. Quite the opposite, in fact—he was demanding as much as he was giving, equal parts gentle and ruthless, giving her no quarter whatsoever. Only when a wave of pure sensation overwhelmed him did he feel himself getting clumsy with his fierceness, as if he were having his very first kiss all over again. As if this single act had wiped out the intervening years, bringing up old passion that he had left to lie fallow—and oh, the way Diana sighed as she leaned closer was like fuel to a fire, bidding him onward, making him even less sure of his mastery.

Only when he felt a deep quiver run through her body, felt her arms sliding around his neck, did he pull away. Damn it, she deserved at least that small cruelty. 'You've failed your challenge, Miss Fenwick.'

'I most certainly have not.' Diana was flushed and breathless, more undone by pleasure than Max could have imagined in his wildest dreams. 'Not in the least.'

'I felt it in you. Felt you shiver.'

'No, you didn't.'

'Damn you, I—'

'You didn't feel it, which means you'll have to do it again.' Diana tossed her head, her bright eyes and flushed lips making her words the most commanding invitation that Max had ever received. 'And you'll have to try considerably harder.'

So this was how it had to be. A pleasurable war—a battle. She couldn't admit it openly, not without throwing away every shred of dignity, of womanhood... *oh, Diana*.

'Fine. If I failed this time, I won't fail again.' With that, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her even harder. A deep, hungry kiss, one

never normally given outside of a bedroom—a kiss that promised other, earthier pleasures were just around the corner. With one hand he held Diana’s head, revelling in the softness of her hair, while the other hand slowly, teasingly traced along the line of her neck.

He was teasing himself as well. Trying to judge just how long it would take before he reached her breasts; he was already at her collarbone, the feel and perfume of her body hardening his cock to a near-painful extent. But moving there would mean losing the pleasures of her mouth, however briefly—and oh, Lord, he’d been waiting for months for this kiss, even if this was the first time he had ever realised it.

Eventually his fingers found the top of her bodice. To soon to go there; he felt her stiffen, quickly moving to her shoulder in response. But as he kissed her even more deeply, losing breath and soul and body in the process as Diana sighed with pleasure, he slowly moved his hand to the underside of her breast.

‘If you wish this to be a battle, you’ll have to let me use every weapon in my possession.’ He whispered in her ear as he moved over the curve of her breast, suppressing a growl at just how good she felt. ‘Do you understand?’

‘Do your worst. As I said—I haven’t felt a thing.’

‘Of course you haven’t.’ That merited a kiss to her neck; he grazed his teeth against Diana’s skin, her soft whimper a lightning-bolt to his cock. ‘Then as you said—I’ll do my worst.’

He bent his head to her bodice. The gown was thin; thin enough to rest his mouth against the hard, swollen point where her nipple touched the fabric and breathe there; Diana quivered at his touch, her sudden gasp music to his ears. With his other hand he gently, lightly brushed away Diana’s skirts from her legs; the shape of her body as it was slowly revealed to him sent fireworks through his brain.

‘Doing my worst would mean touching you here.’ He traced a finger up her leg, watching goosebumps form as he made his way from her calf, to her knee, to her thigh. Her quivering inner thigh, so close to her centre. ‘Do you know that?’

‘I don’t need to know what your worst entails. I already know that it’ll fail.’

‘And kissing you here. Well—not exactly here. I’m going to open your thighs like an oyster, drink from you, and lick your pearl.’ Saying filthy things to any woman was erotic, but saying them to Diana had a unique charge. ‘And that’s not even close to my worst.’

‘Do you know what I think, sir?’

‘Tell me.’

‘I think you enjoy the sound of your own voice far too much.’ Diana leaned over. Max fought the urge to finish right then and there

in his breeches as she gently bit his bottom lip, her voice humming with the tension thickening the air. 'So whatever you're going to do, however you're going to do it, I think you should simply *do it*.'

God, this woman would plague him until he was in his grave. What's more, he'd enjoy every moment of it. With a quiet prayer to whatever ancient god was responsible for this moment of unexpected bliss, he drew Diana's mouth to his again and slid his hand upward, right between her—

'Oh, my goodness! The wheel is practically in pieces!'

Shocked voices. Familiar voices. With a burst of speed that he hadn't even known he was capable of, Max moved himself to the other side of the carriage as far as humanly possible. Diana shrank into her corner of the carriage, her eyes wide with shock, her breathing heavy as people moved closer.

Rescue. How wonderful. As a silhouette appeared at the window, revealing itself as the coachman, Max couldn't remember the last time he'd been left so savagely unsatisfied.

Ketterbrook was as lavishly, uncommonly pretty as a village in a fairy story. Even in the low light and with clouds appearing on the horizon, the low-roofed houses and the distant spire of the church created a tableaux that had the journeying party in rhapsodies as they disembarked from the coach. Only Diana and Max were silent; they stood as far away from one another as humanly possible, the breeze tugging at the hem of Diana's skirt as she tried to arrange her face into an expression of joy.

'Oh, Diana!' Lydia flew into her arms, grinning; Diana bore the weight of her sister with an unexpected rush of gratitude. At least they were to be welcomed by Lydia and Morden tonight, in their charming house by the river; the recently-married couple were all too eager to be hosts, even if she wasn't all that keen to be a guest. Even if all she wanted to do was run into the scraggly patch of woods she could see at the darkening edge of the village, and very possibly live the rest of her life there.

She couldn't look at Max. Couldn't bear to even think of him; if she thought of him, what had happened in the broken carriage came flooding back to her. Pleasure so intense it was painful, great waves of it that had left her panting, gasping for air—and that moment of soft vulnerability, of mutual closeness, before the search party had come to find them.

No. She couldn't think of it. So she didn't think of it, not while greeting Lydia, not while being shown around the white-plastered house with its spotlessly clean parlour and the beautifully embroidered rug. Not while exclaiming with delight at her own room,

eating a fine repast at the dining table while Morden spoke entertainingly of the day and the carriage accident was only briefly mentioned, requiring nothing more than a nod and a pained look on her part. Only when she was left alone in her room, one of the guest rooms with roses in a jug and a mirror stained with age next to the door, did the feelings leave her stunned again.

She sat down on the bed in her nightgown, too tense even to sigh. The memory of Max's mouth on her neck, the feel of his fingers on her thighs, sent a warm shudder through Diana that she could only categorise as need. Need for that feeling, that fulfilment... oh, this couldn't mean that she needed him.

She had to distract herself somehow. If only she had brought more books; the three novels she'd packed didn't seem to have the same emotive pull as they'd had before she'd set off on the journey. She could ask Lydia for some needlework to do, or try and find the kitchens and make some biscuits. Or she could tiptoe along the corridor to where she knew Max had been housed, see if there was light under the door, and ask to be admitted—ask to sit with him and make sense of all this.

Or ask him to touch her again. Beg him.

She shook her head, gritting her teeth. That was weakness—she couldn't be weak, not when it came to Max. What she needed to do, rather than wafting around like a heroine from one of the many stories she'd read, was go and find the cunning little architect of this terrible mess.

Agnes' room was the smallest, at the very end of the corridor. Walking as quickly and decisively as she could, closing her eyes as she passed the door of Max's room, Diana knocked on Agnes' door and waited to be granted entrance.

'Come.' Her sister's tone was so cool, so self-possessed—the little witch! 'Unless you're a murderer.'

Diana bit back a comment as she opened the door, closing it quietly behind her. Agnes was sitting in a chair by the window that overlooked the gardens, her ever-present piece of embroidery in her lap.

'Agnes.' She approached her sister as calmly as she could, but couldn't stop her hands from forming into fists. The tension filling her body was so sharp, she almost felt as if she'd shatter. 'We must speak.'

'If it's about the chickens, you needn't look so angry. All I did was scatter a little grain on the seats—the silly things practically opened the door for me. Besides, they didn't make all that much mess in the end.' Agnes slowly rose to her feet, her eyes widening as she dropped the embroidery on her chair. 'Come now. You've never been so unhappy about a dirty carriage before.'

‘I’m not talking about the chickens. I’m talking about the wheel.’
‘Wheel?’

‘The wheel, Agnes! The wheel you broke!’ Diana stopped, suddenly aware that she was raising her voice. With tremendous effort she swallowed, continuing in a hushed whisper that sounded even more broken than her former tone. ‘The danger that you put me in—put us in! We could have been killed thanks to your stupid piece of mischief, could have been thrown out of the carriage and had our brains dashed out upon the rocks that line the road, all because you’ve snatched a ridiculous idea out of thin air and decided to feed and water it!’

Agnes was silent for a long, cold moment. When she finally spoke again, the barely-repressed anger in her voice made Diana flinch. ‘You think I broke the carriage wheel? You honestly believe that?’

‘What am I meant to believe?’

‘That your carriage broke down on a rough road, as it’s done more than once before? That I’d already spent an inordinate amount of time dreaming up my little plan with Bessie the hen, and would rather die than put you in any sort of danger?’

‘Agnes.’ Diana forced herself to relax her hands, bile filling her throat. She had made a terrible mistake; it was clear from the look of horrified hurt in Agnes’ eyes. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘You’re sorry? You think an apology will be enough?’ A single tear trickled down Agnes’ cheek. ‘How dare you!’

‘I don’t dare. I’ll never dare again.’ Diana crossed the room before Agnes could stop her, enveloping her sister in her arms with a sigh. Agnes briefly resisted, but then folded into her embrace without complaint; Diana buried her face in Agnes’ shoulder, tears of her own arriving. ‘I’m so sorry.’

They stood together for a long, quiet moment, the occasional sniff interrupting the silence. Eventually, Agnes raised her head. ‘But you know what this means?’

‘That you’ve forgiven me?’

‘Almost. Maybe.’ Agnes paused, an owlish twist to her mouth as she looked at Diana. She lowered her voice as she spoke again. ‘I was talking about the carriage. The broken wheel.’

‘If you’re about to confess now, it would be very poor choice.’

‘No confession. As I said—I was content enough with my chicken plan. But I’d be remiss in my duties as your sister if I didn’t tell you that the carriage—’

‘Don’t you dare say it—’

‘—that the carriage seems like destiny.’ Agnes shrugged. ‘I know you know it, somewhere deep down. In a place you don’t want to think about. But if something happened, some declaration...’

‘No declaration. Nothing.’ The thought of even hinting to Agnes about what had occurred was too astonishing to contemplate. ‘Nothing at all, Agnes, and you would do well to remember it.’

‘I don’t believe you. I know it’s irritating, having a secret revealed, but—’

‘There is no secret to reveal. Nothing. I’m telling you now, as clearly and calmly as I possibly can, that the idea of positive sentiment between myself and Maximilian de Feur is so ridiculous as to be laughable. The broken carriage led to an awkward, tedious period of waiting for all of you, where all of my worst instincts and thoughts concerning the man’s temperament were richly rewarded.’ Diana forced herself to relax her fingers, which were in danger of digging into Agnes’ shoulders. ‘So I need you, dear, to stop seeing things that aren’t there.’

‘Oh, but are you—’

‘I’m more sure than you could ever be that there is no love lost, none at all, between myself and Maximilian de Feur. Believe me.’

Eventually, after a long pause and an entirely too knowing look, Agnes nodded. Diana let her go, a wave of exhaustion falling over her like a great, dark curtain. ‘Goodnight, Agnes.’

‘Goodnight.’

She seemed miserable, but there was nothing that could be reasonably done about that. Turning away, Diana left the room.

Agnes would recover in time. Sometimes she had these strange fixations, these uncanny certainties about things, and strength was required to disabuse her of her notions. All would be well in a few days, or a week—as soon as things were no longer being celebrated, when Max’s presence was no longer required, and life could sink happily back into the usual rhythm. A rhythm that seemed dull now, stale almost, but would no doubt flower into something more interesting as soon as she’d organised her mind—

She stopped, her mouth falling open, as Max’s door swung closed.

Had he been listening? Had he heard her speaking to Agnes—heard her disavow anything and everything that had happened in the broken carriage? Had he heard her say, with utter conviction, that there was nothing between them at all?

Most importantly, why was she *upset* at the thought of him having heard it? She had been telling the truth... hadn’t she?

Oh, this was insupportable. Romantic intrigue in books seemed so much more pleasurable than this. Not that this was romantic, not in any way—oh, *dash* it.

Casting a baleful glance at the door, ignoring the ripening pain in her chest that came from deep, surprising melancholy, Diana made her way back to her bedroom. She looked back once at Max’s room,

then twice—but the door was closed, and within there was only silence.

By the time morning came, Max's head ached as if he'd downed a bottle of brandy the previous night. Washing his face with the icy water in the basin didn't help, dressing didn't help, punching the wall in a sudden burst of rage didn't help; it was sleeplessness that had caused this pain, sleeplessness and sorrow, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it.

Diana's words had been utterly reasonable. What was she going to do—declare a love she didn't feel to a sister who had no business knowing about any of it? The interlude in the carriage had been a singular piece of stupidity, a foolish mistake, and Diana had every right to deny to both herself and anyone else that anything had ever occurred. If asked, he would absolutely do the same thing.

But it hurt. Hurt terribly. As he ate his coffee and rolls in silence, barely summoning up the spirit to smile at Hugh or Morden when they said something, Max couldn't quite remember the last time that anything had hurt this much.

It had to have been the end of his first love. He'd been a dramatic young man then, liable to go into stormy moods over the smallest thing—and goodness, when he looked back on it, his sentiments had been a small thing indeed. He couldn't even remember the name of the lady in question; she'd had red curls, and laughed at everything he'd said. But that had been the small green shoot of a feeling, trampled underfoot in a moment—this new feeling felt like a vine, a great green monster as thick as his arm that was growing out of all proportion, impossible to cut down—

'What happened to your knuckles?' Hugh frowned as he took a sip of coffee. 'Did they bleed?'

'Oh, Lord knows. Some unwise turn in my sleep.'

'Goodness. It looks painful.'

'It's nothing.' At least that was the truth. Compared to the internal storm within him, this nagging pain was nothing at all. 'It'll heal.'

'Lydia has some balm for things like that. I'll ask her.'

'Thank you.' As Max raised his coffee cup to drink from, he accidentally crossed gazes with Diana. She looked down at her plate, as if her breakfast roll was quite the most interesting thing in the world—but the very tips of her ears were red, a small detail that made Max melt in ways he'd never previously encountered.

Perhaps all wasn't lost, then. Perhaps he could attempt to make her see sense at the frost fair later on. Try to have a rational conversation with her about completely irrational things in the midst of fire-jugglers and mead-sellers—oh, Christ, it was a lost cause. But

damn it, he had to try.

‘Are you all right? You look a little distant.’

‘I’m all right, Winthrop.’ Max turned to smile at Hugh, almost sure that Diana had raised her head to look at him. ‘I’ll be well soon enough. One way or the other.’

One way or the other. What had he meant? What had the insufferable man meant? Diana frowned as she stamped along the path beside the Swinn, Ketterbrook’s principal river, ignoring as disdainfully as she could the wide array of amusements to be found on the stalls lining the bank. Her breath came in cross clouds; skaters called to one another on the river, their shouts as gay and happy as the chatter of her sisters behind her.

It was insupportable to be this actively engaged with her feelings on such a day. Normally she would be drifting along at the back of the group with a book, occasionally looking up to laugh at something Julia said or advise Phoebe about the correct shade of cloth to buy for tea-towels, or else feed whatever ducks or river birds were available. But now, thanks to Max, her mind was so furiously chained to the moment that she felt as if she couldn’t escape from it.

Escape. She looked longingly at the woodland only a few yards away. Ketterbrook village was ideally placed between river, farmland and forest; how lovely it would be to wander off between the trees and lose herself, even for a little while. Why, she could even attempt to read something beneath the shade of a frost-covered branch.

‘Diana?’ Lydia’s curious voice sounded from the group. ‘You’re running today. What on earth has taken possession of you?’

‘Oh, nothing. A little winter madness.’ Now that the idea of running away for the morning had come to her, it wouldn’t leave until she did something about it. ‘Would you let me be a terrible guest and explore the woodland alone?’

‘That sounds like a very silly idea.’

‘I asked Lydia, Julia. Not you.’

‘I doubt very much there’s a tremendous amount for you, dear, but of course you can have a look.’ Lydia shrugged happily from the midst of the group, looking adoringly at Morden at the end of her sentence as if expecting praise.

Julia frowned. ‘It could be dangerous. You should take a chaperone.’

‘Chaperones are for people Agnes’ age, not old crones like me.’

Diana glanced archly at Agnes, who frowned back. She would have to do work there to recover their former ease, but she couldn’t even think about doing so today. Not with Max at the back of the group, deliberately looking everywhere but her, his wounded knuckles still

visible—Lord, why hadn't he put on gloves? His hands would freeze in this weather. But how had he been wounded, what had he done to cause those angry welts...

'Diana?'

'Sorry?'

'I asked how long you wanted to explore. So we know when to begin worrying.' Lydia stared at her, a line forming between her brows. 'Are you quite well?'

'Yes. Never better.' Now that she knew she could escape all social obligations, if only for a short period without causing concern, the weight on her shoulders seemed lighter. 'An hour?'

'See that you come back before. They'll have the bear baiting in an hour, I think—a horrible sport, but you'll be able to hear it in the woods.' Lydia shuddered; the Fenwicks had never been fond of blood sports, and there had been discussion of eating neither flesh nor fowl at the dinner table the previous evening. 'When you hear the poor thing start roaring, come back. Or else I'll organise a search party.'

'I'd quite like to see the villagers of Ketterbrook take on such an active obligation.' The people of the village, much like Lydia and her new husband, carried a sort of sunny idealism with them that made it hard to imagine them doing anything other than munching corn stalks as they lay in fields. 'But I'll resist temptation.'

'Good.' Julia spoke over Lydia as her younger sister attempted to open her mouth. Lydia sighed with a happy shrug. 'Be careful. Very careful indeed.'

'I promise.' Diana gave a neat curtsy, trying not to roll her eyes, and stepped away from the path with a lighter tread than the one she'd used all morning. Even though she could feel Max's eyes on the back of her neck—or at least, she thought she could—she did her level best to not look back.

By the time she had been walking for at least twenty minutes, at least a few of her cares had been left on the path behind her. All woodland carried a special beauty, especially for the soul that found human company irritating after having to suffer it for more than a few hours, and Ketterbrook wood was rich in every beautiful thing that wild places had to offer; space, quiet, and the occasional soft murmur of creatures going about their business and requiring nothing of one whatsoever. Diana walked beneath the frost-laden trees, admiring the way the frost had been preserved in curling patterns on the tree trunks and fallen logs despite the bright sun overheard, her breath coming easier now as she admired the glory all around her.

A short distance along the crisp path before her lay a half-ruined circle of stones; an ancient temple perhaps, or more likely a folly. There was a far grander one on the Southill Estate; Diana had spent

many happy hours within its carefully aged walls reading, until it had become the fashion to hire a hermit to live in the folly and have him spout wisdom for one's guests. Reading near a barefoot, bearded man who spent half his time loudly praying didn't lend itself well to happy dreaming; Diana had been forced to retreat to her bedroom. Now, maybe, she could recover a few of those lost hours with a dream or two amidst the picturesque Ketterbrook stones.

She stepped into the circle, immediately overcome with a feeling of safety. The folly was so snug, its construction still so evidently well-done despite the artistic areas of ruin, that no rock was going to fall on her while she read. And she would read, read for hours... but there was still that kernel of restlessness, that essential disturbance of mind, that made actually sitting down on a bare patch of earth and opening her book more difficult than she had anticipated.

With a brisk sigh and an inner burst of criticism, she eventually managed it. She smoothed out her skirts, opened the small volume she'd brought with her, and managed to read at least three pages before she closed the book with another, deeper sigh. She looked at the path she had taken, following the line of broken twigs and trampled leaves, suddenly wondering why on earth she had walked all this way if she didn't really want to read.

She had felt happy when she was moving. Perhaps she should move again, keep walking even deeper into the woods. Or perhaps she should stay here, but do something else.

Something like think, truly think, about just how eagerly she had responded to Max's attentions.

No. She couldn't. It was too much to remember how fulfilled she'd been, how eagerly she'd matched his every move. But now that she'd allowed herself to remember, here in the peaceful silence of this wood, one memory followed another like the first drops of rain turning inexorably into a downpour. Memories that connected, however tenuously, to a sentiment so large and clear that she was frightened to even think about it.

The distant sound of breaking branches brought her back to the present. Eager to think about anything else, Diana peered over the half-ruined wall of stones. More sounds, along with a heavy tread; someone was here, a fellow seeker of peace.

It didn't even occur to her to be frightened until she saw the silhouette in the distance; large, imposing. Then, with an electric rush of recognition, she realised exactly who it was.

Had she really not known that he would follow her? Not if she were honest with herself, truly honest. Perhaps, just perhaps, a small but important part of her had wanted this. Wanted to watch him take the path she had taken, searching for her, coming closer and closer

until she could see the look of fraught intent on his intensely charismatic face.

She turned away. She held her breath as Max walked into the circle of stones, his presence suddenly so much larger than life. His considerable height, the easy way with which he carried himself, was tempered by the shadows beneath his eyes and the dark, angry wounds on his knuckle.

She couldn't stop herself as she turned back. 'What did you—'

'It doesn't matter.' Max looked down at his hand, blinking in what looked like embarrassment. 'No need to feel sorry for me.'

'I don't.' A lie, but she had to maintain her *froideur*. To be honest before they had even greeted one another would be a fatal mistake. 'Not at all.'

Max's weary, knowing smile sent sparks through her. 'Of course you don't.'

It wasn't fair that he could read her mind. Not fair at all. Diana looked down, hoping she wasn't blushing, and shivered at Max's quiet chuckle.

Eventually, he spoke again. 'Miss Fenwick.'

'Mr. de Feur.' She waited for him to bow, then curtsied. 'We... we're greeting each other like guests in a ballroom.'

'I know. Although I don't think we've ever greeted one another as politely as this.'

'True.' Oh, how frightening it was to attempt a normal conversation when she could still feel his hands on her body. Still feel the pleasure he'd conjured in her. 'But—but it's good to be cautious.'

'You've never been cautious in your life.' Max paused. 'At least—not that I know of. Not before last night.'

He had heard her, then. Diana kept silent, waiting to see what on earth he could possibly say.

'I don't blame you, you know. For what you said to Agnes.'

'So you were eavesdropping.' She didn't know why that felt like a victory, but it did. 'And you'd be very foolish indeed to object to what I said.'

'Which is why I didn't. Perhaps you didn't hear in your eagerness to insult me.'

'Don't act as if you're not eager to do the same to me.'

'We should talk. Talk about what happened, and the state of things as they are now.'

'I don't think you actually want to talk about it. Not really.' The thought of speaking openly about what they had done made her feel almost faint. 'And as it happens, neither do I.'

'And on what do you base that stunning prediction?'

'The fact that you seem uncomfortable speaking to me here and

now. You look as if you're loathing every moment.'

'Do you think I enjoy standing in a half-ruined folly in a tiny spit of a forest in the cold, talking about sentiments I may or may not feel? It's hardly my idea of a scintillating afternoon.'

'No-one asked you to do this. No-one asked you to follow me and begin this conversation. You're entirely free to stride back out into the daylight and commence irritating all of our friends, as you usually do.'

'But I'm not free. I'm not, and you damn well know it.' Max's dark eyes were alive with something Diana found impossible to ignore. Something raw and blazing. 'And the least you can do—the very least, Miss Fenwick—is admit that both of us, at this precise point in time, lack freedom thanks to our own poor choices.'

She should slap him. But then, she should have slapped him from the moment he took hold of her wrist in the kitchen. Instead she had smeared syllabub on his cheek and all but dared him to do something about it. Instead she had kissed him in the carriage as if her very life depended on it—and oh, hadn't it felt as if her life had depended on it, on each and every kiss, on his hands as they'd explored her body?

All she could do was stare, silent, wishing she had the courage to hate him. Eventually, with a rush of ecstasy-laced defeat, she gave a small, tight nod.

'You see?' The slight tremble in Max's voice, the flash of vulnerability in his expression that came and went as quickly as summer lightning, brought a tide of some new and unnameable feeling to Diana's core. 'I knew it.'

'You know nothing about what I feel.'

'I don't need to know the details of it. I can barely plumb the depths of mine—I'm frightened of its surface, let alone what lies beyond that.' Max, admitting he was frightened of something. That was very new. 'All I know, Miss Fenwick, is that it's intolerable.'

'I quite agree.' Still, strange that a part of her should bristle at the fact that Max had said it first. If anyone was to declare this intolerable, it should have been her. 'In fact, I couldn't agree more.'

'I've suffered more over the last few days than I've suffered over the course of my life.'

'What a tremendously dull life you must have led.'

'Have you felt stranger than this? What depths have you been driven to? The most you've ever had to suffer has been a novel with a depressing ending.'

'If I was ever to face true suffering, I know I wouldn't shirk it. Can you say the same? Given how shallowly you flit over life's surface, given how grim this brief period of unnatural passion has made you, do you honestly think you'd be able to meet a true test of your courage?'

‘Don’t speak about things you know nothing of.’

‘I’ll say what I damned well like.’

‘Look at you, blushing with pleasure when you blaspheme. Christ, I—’

‘I *what?*’

‘Of all the people in the world to feel this way about.’ Max shook his head, his jaw clenched so tightly that Diana could see a vein protruding from his neck. ‘Of all the bloody people.’

They had gone too far. Somewhere in the middle of that excruciating rush of a conversation, they had both managed to step over the line that separated witty insults from mere hurtful comments. A wave of shame filled Diana, along with the hot, panicked feeling of having been both deeply and unexpectedly insulted; Max stepped forward, already holding up his hands.

‘I’m sorry.’ They said the words at the same time. In the silence that followed, the curling frost on the folly stones seemed to audibly glisten.

‘I am. Truly.’ Diana moved closer to Max. Her throat wouldn’t work properly; it caught at her words, making her sound as if she was on the verge of tears. ‘I had no right to assume that your life has been without hardship. That was cruel of me.’

‘Not as cruel as I’ve been. I should never have been so—so rude.’

‘It’s understandable. Having to think about me against your own volition must be—must be quite frightful.’

‘I didn’t say it was frightful.’

‘You implied it.’

‘And I was wrong. It’s... it’s better to be chained to a storm, I think, than to freely choose middling sort of weather.’ Max said it with a faint air of surprise, as if he couldn’t believe the words coming out of his own mouth. ‘If one has to be chained.’

‘One doesn’t. One can’t.’

‘Agreed. And so we must unchain ourselves, somehow.’

As shocking as her new emotions were, the idea of being without them felt just as strange. More strange, even; Diana brought her hand to her mouth, pressing her knuckles to her lips as she attempted to breath steadily.

‘I’ve thought about leaving. Fantasised, even. But Miss Fenwick, I fear that I’d uproot my life completely, travel to the ends of the earth, and find this bundle of sentiments waiting for me wherever I chose to lay my head. As you can imagine, that would be no small expense and a great deal of trouble for nothing.’ Max’s voice was lower now, slow and quiet. It was almost hypnotic. ‘I’ve considered ending my friendship with Hugh—’

‘You wouldn’t be so cruel. You wouldn’t.’

‘Well, no. As it happens, I wouldn’t. Thank you for the stirring vote of confidence. And so, after a lot of thought and a lot of trying not to think, I came to a conclusion. One that I’m almost sure you won’t like.’

‘You think you can predict me?’

‘Yes. Just as I think you can predict me.’

To that, Diana had no adequate response. She couldn’t predict him; he was unfathomable. All she could do was keep silent, reassess everything she’d ever thought, as Max continued.

‘We have this great collection of unmanageable sentiments. Like a stable of thoroughbreds kept locked in the dark—they kick at their stables, bite the doors, whinny all night. Now I may be no great horseman, Miss Fenwick, but the only reasonable thing I can think of to do would be to... to...’

‘... To let them run free.’

The words had appeared in her mind before Max had hesitated. The enormity of the thought was staggering. Diana looked into his eyes, wordless, hardly knowing whether to be shocked that he had suggested it—or that she herself had thought it.

‘Exactly.’ Max let out a low, ragged sigh. ‘But moving to the other side of the world seems more reasonable, now that I’ve said the words out loud.’

‘But—but would it work?’

‘I’ve already said that I doubt travel will shake it, but one has to try.’

‘No. The... the other suggestion.’

Max blinked. When he spoke again, his murmur travelled down Diana’s spine like a drop of hot, honey-scented water. ‘I don’t know. But I can’t think of any other way.’

‘Have you not—not tried it before?’

‘No. I’ve always been very good at throwing people away. But... not you, Miss Fenwick. Not you.’

She shouldn’t feel special. Shouldn’t feel as if that drop of water had become a hot, slick torrent, warming her everywhere. But he’d said it, said it as if he was telling the truth—and oh, what if he was right? What if they could give into it here and now, to this ridiculous passion that had left her aflame, and leave sated?

‘It’s a risk, of course. There’s a risk of discovery, or of failure. But I can’t think of that, not now. I can’t.’

‘I know.’

‘With all due respect, you can’t know. This can’t possibly plague you as it does me.’

‘That—that’s ridiculous.’ How he always had the power to make her angry, she really didn’t know. She was almost glad at the return of

such a simple emotion; it made her other sentiments seem much less complex. 'Ridiculous, and dismissive.'

'It isn't dismissive. You don't know how I feel.'

'And you don't know how I feel. You—you...'

She couldn't say it. Couldn't even begin to express the confusing, chaotic mess that took possession of her mind and heart whenever she looked at or thought about Max. All she could do was stare silently at him, the wood around him making them seem impossibly far away from the rest of the world.

And then Max's lips were on hers, as unexpected as a firework in a clear night sky, and the world seemed to disappear entirely.

Oh. Diana sighed into the kiss, every muscle in her body suddenly weak, Max's hands moving to her arms. He took a step forward, backing her against the crumbling stone wall of the folly; Diana gasped as the cold stones made themselves felt against her back, only to sink even more greedily into the kiss. Every kiss she'd ever imagined had been sweet, insubstantial—not like Max's kisses, not fierce and exacting and full of dark fire, leaving her breathless and flustered and desperate, absolutely desperate, for more.

She couldn't pretend that she was indifferent to him now. Couldn't bear to feign coldness, even for a moment. With a moan of frustration that practically crystallised in the cold air, she pulled her cloak free of her neck and tugged Max's head down towards her breasts. Max, with a growl that made her body tingle with exquisite, shattering tension, kissed the swell of her breasts with the same ardent aggression that he'd lavished on her lips.

She needed more. More than she knew how to ask for; she wanted to demand it, but she didn't have the words. All she could do was nod, whimper in agreement and support, as Max pulled her bodice down with an uncompromising grip and drew one of her nipples into his mouth.

The pleasure was a deep, all-encompassing shock. Enough of a shock for Diana to throw her head back against the old stones, a shard of ice tangling in her hair as she arched her back, gasping at the feel of Max's mouth. Those lips, that tongue responsible for so many glib comments, cutting remarks—how perfect they felt here, in service to her pleasure, licking and sucking with such open relish that it had to be a sin.

He moved from one breast to the other, his teeth gently grazing against her nipples with a wicked eagerness, holding her against the old wall with such effortless strength that Diana could only yield to him, encourage him, hope against all hope that he never ever stopped.

When he pulled away, she bit her lip to contain a howl of annoyance. 'Don't stop you—you monster.'

‘You’ve called similar things to that in the past, or implied them, and it’s never stopped me before.’ Max’s low, raw murmur in her ear was enough to make the sparks between Diana’s thighs grow to a swift, blazing fire.

‘Then carry on, you—you—’

‘You can’t even call me a bastard. You’re far too gently-bred.’

‘Fine. Carry on, you bastard.’

‘Say it like you mean it, you imperious little princess.’ Max bent his head to her breasts again; his brief, searing kiss to her swollen nipple was enough to make Diana want to scream. ‘One more time.’

‘Please don’t stop.’ Oh, Lord, she meant it. The thought of being without this bliss, even for a moment, was painful. ‘Please.’

Max looked up at her. The feeling in his eyes was powerful enough to stop Diana from begging; they stared at one another for a long moment. Then, with a furious sigh that betrayed anger at his own sentiments, Max covered her mouth with his in a kiss that came like a blow.

Now her breasts were suddenly tight against Max’s greatcoat. The tiny drops of melted ice clinging to the wool made every throbbing, reddened inch of her flesh come alive with new feeling; she moaned into Max’s mouth as he moved his hands to her skirts, freeing her arms. He pulled up Diana’s skirts, her legs suddenly exposed to the cold air; Diana gasped as he lifted her legs, his hands hot against her skin as he pinned her securely against the wall, her thighs splayed in a thoroughly immodest manner as Max moved closer still.

She’d never felt anything like this. Mouth to mouth, skin to skin, the scent of snow and trees in the air only making Max’s body more vital, more immediate. As if she’d found some long-lost limb, some forgotten part of herself, and needed to take it in to make herself whole.

Hardly knowing what she was doing, she moved her hands to Max’s coat. The buttons were stiff with cold, difficult to undo, but she fought with them; soon his shirt was revealed, his rapid breathing visible beneath it, and his breeches. His breeches, with the stiff outline of his cock evident under the buckskin.

She didn’t know anything about male anatomy apart from the crudest basics. With four sisters, it was difficult to acquire a practical understanding—but they’d certainly discussed theory. Working on little more than instinct, full of the giddy, impossible feeling of floating with her feet above the ground, she fumbled with the top of Max’s breeches until his rigid cock sprang free.

All she wanted to do was touch it. Take hold of the smooth, silken shaft and feel the heat, the potency radiating through it. As she did so Max cried out; a deep, raw cry that mixed pleasure with shock. Yes,

more of that, she craved it—she could run her hand along his shaft like this, caressing him, letting him have just the smallest taste of her own medicine.

But Max had other ideas. Ideas he seemed conflicted about, but still—he was clear enough when he pressed himself against her, her skirts pushed away with one impatient arm as he held her up with the other, until his cock was brazenly pressed to her mound in a way that could only mean one thing.

‘Tell me no.’ His mutter in her ear was impossibly erotic. As frantic as the rest of this encounter—as if he’d die without her. ‘Tell me no, and I won’t.’

‘But I want to.’

‘It’ll hurt.’

‘I’ve ridden horses since I could walk.’

‘You—god damn you, you argue with me here and now?’ Max’s laughter tickled her ear. ‘Truly?’

‘Yes.’ If it meant getting what her body wanted, what some part of her needed despite every consequence she could think of, she’d argue with him until Judgement day. ‘I can, and I will, and—and please.’

She couldn’t beg anymore. She had to preserve some small part of herself. But she wouldn’t have to, not with Max seemingly reading her thoughts—he would know what to do. He had known what to do before, and she had been left with more pleasure than she had known what to do with.

With a slow, dizzying tide of pleasure that broke over her in waves, Diana muffled her moan in Max’s greatcoat as he sank inside her.

Even the pain felt good. A tightness that briefly overwhelmed her, bringing her to the point of crying out, but by the time she was considering it the sensation was already changing into something infinitely better. She shifted her hips, some animal part of her already eager to have more of him, and the resulting burst of ecstasy sent a deep shiver down her spine.

‘Fuck.’ Max’s whisper only made it feel better. He pressed his forehead to Diana’s; his eyes were so dark, so hungry, with something bestial in them that mirrored her own wants. ‘I—’

‘I know.’ If they tried to put the feeling into words, something would be lost. This was enough; this was everything. ‘I know.’

For a moment, it looked as if Max was going to reply. Say something that would change their rapport even more profoundly. Then, with a brief shake of his head and a kiss that would have set fire to a frozen lake, he thrust deeper still.

Almighty God. Diana had never been one for overt displays of religion, but the feeling was too divine to think of anything else. She

wrapped her arms around his neck, fiercely clinging to him as Max withdrew only to thrust again, the world dwindling down to a single, sharp point of pure bliss as her body urged him onward.

There was no time to be gentle, to play. This was so frantic and urgent that it almost felt like war, the rhythm one of combat. They had been so ready for one another that it came out of nothing, pure alchemy; a give and take of thrusts that had Diana gripping him with every muscle she had, numbly, greedily demanding more with every gasp, every cry. Max had seen through her loathing, all the way down to the desire—and damn it, he was meeting every need her body had, satisfying her even as her appetites increased. A swift, blissful rush of victory ran through her when she realised she was doing the same to Max; she'd never seen him so undone, so clumsily fierce in his attentions, as if she were gold that would vanish if he looked away.

Soon it was impossible to think rationally. The pleasure was too great; it filled her from head to foot, her centre wet and throbbing with it, each thrust from Max only making it more dangerously acute. Biting her lip, a stab of unaccustomed shame puncturing her pleasure, she murmured in Max's ear. 'I... it's building, something is building—'

'I've got you.' Max's low growl filled Diana's heart, bringing it to the point of breaking. 'You're safe. Let it come.'

An order. An order that she never would have obeyed if the world was different. But this was the world where she had challenged Max, provoked him—and uncovered something in them both that she never expected. Now an order from Max felt strangely sweet, even with him deep inside her, striking at the very core of her.

You're safe. Let it come. And it did come, an explosion so savage that it felt as if she were coming apart at the seams. A whirl of pleasure, like starlight in its intensity—and she was at its very heart. It was enough to make her cry out his name, kissing him with a frenzied need that only heightened the ecstasy, her fingers quivering as she tangled them in his hair.

She barely felt the shiver that went through Max, or the whisper of her own name in her ear; only when he withdrew, leaving her empty, did she moan weakly with frustration. Two hot spurts against her thigh, then another, sent a small aftershock of pleasure singing through Diana's body in a way that felt both forbidden and enchanting.

Then, silence. All-encompassing silence, the world suddenly as quiet as a monastery, the wall making itself felt against her back again in a way that made her muscles ache. The cold mingling with the heat of her breath—and Max slowly, gently putting her back down on her feet, holding her close when her knees buckled, then letting her free.

For a moment, all she could do was look at him. Look at his broad

shoulders and capable hands and dark eyes brimming with feeling, his looks imprinting themselves on her heart in an entirely new way, as something fundamental rearranged itself around him. Only then did what they had done, the sheer enormity of it, settle on her shoulders.

They had done the unspeakable. Fallen into their desires in a desperate attempt to overcome them—so they could look at one another and feel nothing at all, or at most feel a pleasant neutrality.

But it hadn't worked. It hadn't worked at all. Because as she stared at Max now, her body still raw and aching from the pleasure he had given her, all Diana wanted was to run into his arms again. To feel a hint, a taste of what she had felt when she had kissed him.

'Diana.' Max stepped forward; Diana instinctively stepped back. He was frowning; he felt it took, then, the growing sense of failure. 'Diana, I didn't think it would—'

'But it did.' She didn't even know what she was saying. The die had been cast, and their own terrible choices had left things even more confusing than before. She turned away, frantically restoring herself to decency with shaking hands. 'It did.'

If only he would take her in his arms again. Take charge, tell her what she was supposed to think and do. She had no tools for a moment like this, no way of simply rising above it all. As she turned back to Max, staring at him, Diana realised with a thrill of shock that he didn't know what to do either.

He really had been expecting this to work. Expecting this single transgressive act to undo all of the feelings that had led to it. Now that this outcome hadn't happened, he was as confused and lost as she was.

'I'm sorry.' At least Max sounded as if he meant it. Diana bit her lip so hard she almost tasted blood. To still feel these things was a failure for him, then—still a problem that had to be solved.

That meant, of course, that she had to conceal her own sentiments. To admit any sort of weakness now would be worse than death.

'I'm sorry too.' It came out cold, as cold as the woods around them. Max flinched, frowning. 'Truly.'

For a moment it looked as if Max was going to reply. Instead, with a short nod that felt even more clipped than Diana's apology, he simply folded his arms. They stared at one another, the intimacy of the folly slowly transforming into old, crumbling sterility.

If he says something now, anything, we can save it. Diana kept silent, knowing that she would begin to weep if she spoke. *Anything at all. Any honest thing.*

He needs to say something. He has more power than me, here and now. Because a word from him, a single word, and I'll crawl to him on my

knees.

Nothing came. Instead, with a sigh that sounded as if it came from his very bones, Max looked away.

That was it, then. Enough evidence to pack up whatever remained of her new, fragile hopes, and leave. Diana stepped out of the ruined folly, the cold air falling on her like a shroud.

She was almost sure she heard a sound as she walked along the path. But as much as she wanted to, she didn't look back.

The book was very new. Bought at great expense from a bookseller whose shoes and waistcoat were more elaborate than Diana's gown, chosen for its length and the pleasant, papery smell that came from its pages, it promised at least three days of adventure-laden escape and commanded an equivalent price. It currently sat on the small table by the window in Diana's bedroom that overlooked the Southill lawns, pristine and untouched a week after its purchase.

Diana, sitting in bed in her nightgown despite the sun being high, rolled her eyes and looked away from it.

Feigning a headache that had lasted a week was difficult enough. In the old days, before Julia and Phoebe had become mothers, a mysterious affliction in any one of them would have been cause for frantic discussions and acute observations of their emotional state. From what she could recall, both Julia and Phoebe had pretended to be ill—or at least hinted at it—when they had suffered some sentimental setback with the men that had eventually become their husbands. Neither of them had even attempted to read during their periods of emotional extremity—and now, looking at the book as if she were looking at an enemy, Diana could see why. Sinking into an imaginary world seemed impossible, completely impossible, when the world around her had become so frighteningly full of incident.

She didn't want to read. For the first time in her life, written words on a page held no interest for her whatsoever—and it was that, that more than anything else, that made her throw every curse and imprecation she could think of down upon Max's absent head.

If Max were here, she could read. If she had spoken her mind in that wood, if they had talked to one another like adults, they could have reached the conclusion together that had come to her alone, practically splitting her head in two with the force of it—that all their striving to loathe one another, all their verbal play, had been a vain attempt to avoid the truth.

They were perfect for one another. They were two sides of the same coin. If they were softer, sweeter people, well... then she would say that she was in love with him, and he with her.

That was what every frank, biting conversation had been about.

That was why the fire between them had roared out of all proportion as soon as they'd allowed for the possibility of it existing. And that was why, after the moment in the woods that had made everything so painfully clear, her inability to seize that moment had left her languishing in her bed. She'd managed to bear it until she'd said goodbye to Lydia and Morden, until she was alone in the carriage trundling back to the Southill Estate... but now, she couldn't bear it anymore.

Let it come. She had let it come, that pleasure, and it had ruined absolutely everything. Including, if she were only a shade more pessimistic, the chance of a contented future.

'Diana?' Agnes. Diana sighed, suddenly wishing she could hide in the curtains. 'May I enter?'

Nothing would change if she said no. She would continue to waste away in bed like a maiden with consumption, and Agnes would no doubt find a way to speak to her anyway. The woman was as irrepressible as ivy. 'Come.'

Agnes entered. Even in the midst of her weakened irritation, Diana noted that her youngest sister looked as pale and thin as she did. Sitting up in bed, she held out a hand to her. 'Are you well?'

'Everyone's asking the same thing about you.'

'They aren't. Julia is fussing over her daughter and Phoebe is fussing over hers. They have no time to think about fripperies.'

'You're not a frippery. And I miss the days when we only had one another to think about.' Agnes sighed. 'I didn't sleep very well.'

'Why?'

'I'm not entirely sure if I can tell you.'

Max. Something had happened to Max. Diana briefly sank back against her pillows, too frightened to breathe, but quickly recovered her equilibrium when she noted the exact expression on Agnes' face. There was no true fear there: apprehension, yes, but not the terror of having to give bad news. 'Agnes, just tell me. I've been practically living in this room for a week, living on water biscuits and milk, and I'm fairly sure you know why. Rather than have a long, wearisome conversation where I admit you're right, and you gloat as politely as you can, you can give me whatever little piece of news you've come across referring to Mr. De Feu and leave me be.'

'I think this is more than a little piece of news.'

'Well, I—what is it?'

'You did all but make me promise not to meddle. And I haven't meddled. It's—well, it depends on whether this conversation counts as meddling.'

'Agnes, I can only assume you don't know how irritating you're being at this precise moment.'

‘Oh, really. It’s not enough that this business with Mr. de Feur has made you melancholy—now you’re irritable.’ Agnes rolled her eyes. ‘I hope I don’t become this intractable when I find the gentleman I’m destined to be with.’

‘For the last time, you must stop saying that Mr. de Feur—’

‘The bookshop.’

‘Beg pardon?’

‘The bookshop on Milton Street. Or rather, what used to be the bookshop. The one that fell into disrepair. The one that you can’t help but comment on every time we walk past it, with sad eyes and a vague air that something should be done about it.’

‘What does the bookshop on Milton Street have to do with—’

‘He’s purchased it. Mr. de Feur, I mean. And I can’t count that as meddling, because you would have read yesterday’s newspaper eventually. Perhaps not today, but at some point.’ Agnes handed the newspaper to Diana, who clutched at it with a trembling hand. ‘So really, I haven’t played any part in this whatsoever.’

‘Agnes, I love you dearly.’

‘I—thank you.’

‘I love you dearly, and please go away.’

With a sigh and a smile, Agnes went.

Diana read the page in front of her. After a few seconds of agonised searching, she found the title.

New Milton bookshop owner seeks well-read proprietress.

Of course he would do it like this. No polite letter of apology, no desperate visit to the estate in order to attempt a proper courtship. An open, brazen display of knowledge, that was Max’s style; he had heard her comment about the bookshop, seen the value of that unspoken wish, and in the absence of more traditional methods of apology... well...

... he’d done something very close to perfect.

She bowed her head, repressing tears or laughter—she honestly couldn’t tell which. With Max, one never quite knew where one was.

But if she visited the bookshop as soon as possible, now in fact, just as soon as she’d dressed—well, perhaps she could find out.

‘Where am I meant to put these volumes, sir?’

‘I don’t know. Where do they normally go?’

‘Sir?’ The bookseller’s face creased in pained confusion. ‘Are you asking me where books normally go in a bookshop?’

‘I know they’re meant to go on the shelves. I’ve managed to make that small intellectual leap.’ Max massaged his brow with his hand, acutely aware that the bookseller was looking at him as if he’d taken

leave of his senses. He was the fifth bookseller to arrive that morning, eager to sell certain jewels from their collection to the renovated Milton establishment, and the fifth one to suffer a crisis once their buyer's ignorance was revealed. 'But what's the categorisation system that should be used?'

'System? Well... one can use the alphabet. Or one can organise by area of interest. The maps can be grouped together, of course, and the fashion plates for the next Season. Those are normally placed in the window, so ladies feel the urge to enter.'

'If I give you a large sum of money, could you organise these ungodly heaps of books into something attractive to both casual observers and serious collectors?'

The bookseller perked up. 'What would a large sum mean in this context?'

'Larger than you would have got for simply delivering the books and walking away. Once I see the results, I'll grow more specific.'

The bookseller shrugged. 'Agreed.'

One problem solved, at least. Max waved a hand at the bookseller, who leapt eagerly to his new and unexpected work, and walked away from the piles of new books onto the shop floor.

He had never owned a bookshop. He had never owned anything, really, apart from the pile of family acquisitions—houses, land, paintings—and even then, it was his sister Beatrice who had taken charge of those. Now he was a business-owner, engaged in the grubby world of trade, already facing all sorts of incredulity and downright suspicion from friends and foes alike—and it felt like an absolute lifeline against the world of darkness that had reared up to swallow him after that day in the woods.

There had never been any question of not trying to win her. Even though that last conversation had been painful, full of stifled feeling and fear on both sides, he had known as soon as he'd spoken to her in the middle of that folly that something fundamental had changed. No, not even changed—revealed itself. Finally shown itself as the truth he should have known all along.

He spent all his time needling Diana because he was obsessed with her. Utterly infatuated. And Diana, thank God, felt similarly to himself—at least, that was his hope. And this impetuous purchase of an entire business, even if it could end in failure, was the only true sign he could think of that would prove that even the smallest revelation from her, the tiniest glimpse of her inner world, was important enough for him to alter the entire course of his life.

She might never visit. That was a possibility. But she'd find out some day, somehow, and she'd know. That, Max thought with a deep sigh, would have to be enough... but until then, he had a bookshop to

both stock and staff.

Strange, how exciting this venture felt. Loving Diana had proven conclusively that floating along the surface of life, taking pleasure from everything and flitting away once things grew too complicated, was an oddly empty way to live.

He picked up a register from a dusty desk, rolling his eyes as he attempted to read the tangled spider-web of writing within. Buying great quantities of books was easy—it was working out what on earth to do with them as they arrived that was the difficult part. Rather like the ease of falling in love, as opposed to the hard but necessary work of maintaining a rapport. ‘Who is Parker, and why have I bought eighteen volumes of his work?’

‘He’s terribly popular. Not of the greatest quality, but beloved by young and old.’ The bookseller’s head popped out of a pile of stacked volumes. ‘I imagine that young lady will want the latest copy.’

‘Young lady?’

‘The one making a beeline from the door.’ The bookseller pointed. ‘She looks like she’s in desperate need of a book.’

Max held his breath. For a moment he didn’t want to follow the line of the bookseller’s finger; the hope was so precious, so fragile, but it would spear his heart if it shattered. Eventually, with a sigh that felt almost painful, he looked out of the window of the shop.

He rose to his feet, his fingers suddenly trembling.

‘I could prepare the first three Parker volumes, if you want an easy sale. And if you want my opinion, sir, a large jar of comfits or some other sweet on the counter top will be a nice incentive for people to stay a little longer—’

‘The sum of money I give you after today will grow considerably larger if you leave now. For about an hour. Go and find a mug of beer, or a gin—something.’

‘Sir?’

‘Have I made myself clear?’

‘What does considerably larger mean?’

‘You’re a funny man, and on any other day I’d enjoy that. But now is the time to simply do what I say, rather than involve me in this wearisome little variety stage-play.’

‘Fine by me, sir.’ The bookseller walked to the door, shrugging as he tipped his hat to Max. ‘You’re the one paying.’

‘Two mugs of beer. I’ll pay for them. Go.’

The bookseller began to whistle as he walked out onto the street. Max watched him go, waiting until he was far out of sight, before he ran to the door on feet that threatened to stumble.

He reached the threshold before Diana did. Diana, dressed with perfect elegance for the outdoors, but wan and thin beneath her gown.

She had suffered then, this week without him—oh, he didn't want to like that fact, like that she had suffered, but his pain had been just as great. It was yet another sign that this was the right thing to do.

'Miss Fenwick.' Should he try to be funny? 'If you've come to see about the position of proprietress, I can only—'

The force of the slap Diana gave him almost knocked him off his feet. As he staggered backward, noting even in the midst of his pain and surprise just how beautiful Diana looked, how thoroughly elegant, Diana closed the door to the bookshop and decisively turned the sign on the door from *open* to *closed*.

Max blinked, his face still aflame from the slap. He absolutely deserved it, of course; the newspaper announcement had taken considerable cheek, but he had an abundance of that. Once he'd recovered his bearings, he stared down at Diana as she began to talk.

'Is this how you open communications, Mr. de Feur? A newspaper article seeking workers? I don't work for you—I don't work for anyone. The idea that you would do this based on a single throwaway comment I made is astonishing, and not in a pleasant way—it proves an unseemly spontaneity, an unwise way of viewing things that can only lead to—'

Max placed a finger to her lips. Diana stopped, her eyes widening; whatever words she had been about to say faded into a deep, trembling sigh as Max replaced his finger with his lips.

A deep, harsh kiss, so naked it was almost painful. He had to hold his breath to keep from moaning. His soulmate, his love, the devil on his shoulder and the angel on the other—they were all Diana, she was everything, and by God he'd try his best to be everything to her as well.

'Upon... upon reflection.' Diana's voice was husky and vulnerable when he finally pulled away. 'Perhaps I could consider employment.'

'I'm a terribly harsh taskmaster. I'm sure you'd make lots of mistakes. Perhaps, rather than employing you, we could simply marry and employ someone who can manage this place more competently than you or I could.'

'The fact that you can tease me with such ease in this precise moment, with all that has gone before it, makes you—'

'The love of your life. I know.'

'I... my God, you're exhausting.'

'If you tell me you love me, Miss Fenwick, it'll save time. I won't have to be so very tiring from morning to night, because I'll have found my peace.'

'I love you.'

'And I love you. Now, have you ever considered that I bought this bookshop for a completely unrelated business concern?'

‘Not even for a minute.’

‘Good, because I didn’t. I bought it for you, based on a single sentence out of that beautiful mouth, and I’d do it again. I’d do it a thousand times over. Because I love you madly, and that’s how I’m going to show I love you—madly.’

‘I’m going to plague you with my love until we’re buried together.’

‘Oh, weak words from you. You can do better than that.’ Another, hungrier kiss. ‘Do you think death can part us?’

‘True. I should have been more ambitious.’

‘And I should have known that I love you from the very first, Diana. We all make mistakes.’ Max drew her to his breast, near-drugged with the happiness that flooded his veins. ‘But my love, we have a lifetime to do better.’

THE END

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